

“Compelled”
March 20, 2022

Mark 15:21-24

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been fascinated with Simon of Cyrene. There is so little said about him in the Gospels...one verse each in Mark, Luke and Matthew, and no mention of him at all in the Gospel of John. And yet Simon’s role feels indispensable, especially in this season of Lent as we move closer to Holy Week.

Someone had to bear the cross for Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem and up to the hill on Golgotha. Especially after Jesus had been whipped by the Roman authorities and was too tired and in too much pain to bear the heavy cross himself. And Simon was the man assigned from the crowd.

Who was this Simon of Cyrene though? What do we know about him? What do we not know about him? And most importantly, what might we learn from him?

The first thing we know about Simon is self-evident. We know his name. That may not seem like a big deal, but in a Gospel filled with stories of men and women who are unnamed, the fact that Simon is named in today’s Scripture lesson is significant. To be precise, it means he was important enough to be remembered by name.

We also know that Simon was from Cyrene, a place in modern day Libya in north Africa. If you were to travel by car from Cyrene to Jerusalem today, according to the Google Map on my cellphone, it would take a total of twenty-one hours and fifty minutes. Of course, back in the days of Jesus there were no cars. To make the same trek by foot, according to Google Maps and as Simon presumably did, would take 360 hours. Or fifteen days if you walked continuously straight through without stopping.

It's clear that it took a long time for Simon of Cyrene to get to Jerusalem. What’s unclear from the story is why Simon went to Jerusalem. Many scholars and religious figures down through the ages have assumed that Simon was Jewish. There was a fairly large Jewish population living in northern Africa in the days of the New Testament and Simon may well have been among them. Which likely means Simon would have been on a pilgrimage from Cyrene to Jerusalem in order to be in the holy city to celebrate the Feast of Passover with fellow Jews from around the ancient world.

Many scholars and preachers go even one step further. They point to Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross as a transformative experience in Simon’s life. And they spin out Simon’s story with a decidedly Christian twist. As though Simon was so moved by carrying the cross that he eventually became a convert from Judaism to Christianity. In other words, the man who carried the cross for Christ became a follower of Christ, or so this line of thinking goes.

The problem is the Gospel never indicates Simon was Jewish. So the idea that Simon of Cyrene was converted from Judaism after Jesus died is a step too far. Maybe two steps too far.

It's equally possible, I believe, that Simon of Cyrene was a Gentile who happened to be in Jerusalem when Jesus was nearing the end of his life. Maybe Simon was a tourist passing through the city. Maybe Simon had heard stories about who Jesus was and Simon was curious to see the man up close for himself. Simon could have been just another face in the crowd that day. One interested spectator among many...and nothing more.

In any case, Simon, who journeyed hundreds of miles from north Africa to get to Jerusalem, was standing by the roadside. He might have been Jewish and in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Or he might have been a Gentile and in Jerusalem as a sightseer.

Either way, as Jesus was dragging himself and his cross through the city streets, I suspect Simon would have felt some measure of sympathy. Most of the people in the crowd that long ago day would not have relished the spectacle of a fellow human being suffering. Even the ones who assumed Jesus was guilty of some crime.

Nevertheless, there is no way Simon of Cyrene could have prepared himself to be called out by the band of Roman soldiers surrounding Jesus. Neither Simon nor anyone else in the crowd that day could have anticipated that chilling moment when Simon instantly went from a face in the crowd to a man singled out and put on the spot. Mark's Gospel uses the word "compelled", as in Simon of Cyrene had no choice in the matter. Either step forward and pick up the heavy wooden cross for Jesus. Or stay where he was and face the swift and brutal wrath of the heavily armed Roman soldiers.

Forced to follow the command of the Roman guards, Simon did as required and bore the cross for Jesus on his own shoulders. All the way from the streets of Jerusalem to a hill named "Golgotha", which was located on the city outskirts. We assume Simon carried the task to completion because when Jesus arrived on Golgotha, the cross Simon carried was there waiting to be used.

Anything else we know about Simon of Cyrene is open to interpretation. If there were more verses in the Gospel dedicated to Simon, we would likely be on surer ground. But given the fact that Simon was named and given the fact that Simon participated in such a pivotal event in the life and death of Jesus, his story is worth pondering. Because there are some insights we can draw about Simon of Cyrene to help shape our faith generations later.

First, it's hard to avoid making a comparison between Simon of Cyrene in today's story and the other, more famous Simon in the Gospels. Namely, Simon Peter.

Simon Peter received considerably more press in the Gospel. He was arguably the most famous of all the disciples. The one who understood the identity of Jesus before

most others. The one who willingly to put himself on the line when all the other disciples cowered in fear and doubt. It's not to say that Simon Peter always got it right. When Simon Peter got it wrong, he failed miserably. To be sure, however, Simon Peter talked a big game.

By contrast, Simon of Cyrene was nowhere near Jesus's inner circle. He was not a disciple, not a committed follower, not even an acquaintance of Jesus. But even if Simon of Cyrene had very little choice when the Roman soldiers called his name, the fact is he stepped up to help Jesus when Jesus needed help the most. And he did it quietly and faithfully and steadily.

Discipleship isn't about working our way into the inner circle or talking a big game. Sometimes following Jesus means quietly, faithfully, steadily putting our faith into action with no questions asked and no pat on the back expected...

Second, I think of Simon of Cyrene in light of what's going on in the world right now. The fact is that Simon of Cyrene stands among millions of people down through history who have been compelled by powers and principalities to participate in state sanctioned violence and injustice.

We're seeing this phenomenon play out in Ukraine and in Russia as we gather this morning. Millions and millions of our brothers and sisters wanted nothing more than to blend in with the crowd and live their lives. And yet, they've been effectively called out of their homes and their daily routines by Putin and his army. So many people compelled or conscripted into a bloody conflict that was not of their own choosing

Simon of Cyrene represents collateral damage in the story of the end of Jesus's life. With the weight of the Roman Empire brought to bear, Simon was forced to participate in the unjust and unnecessary death of an innocent man...a story that keeps repeating throughout human history...

Finally, there's something about the image of Simon of Cyrene that we don't want to let go. When Jesus could no longer carry the cross, Simon of Cyrene picked the cross up off the ground himself. But let's not assume that because Simon wasn't beaten and exhausted the way Jesus was, it was easy to carry the cross. The cross was heavy. Golgotha was a fair distance away from Jerusalem's streets. And neither the Roman guards nor any spectators were inclined to offer a helping hand.

In the midst of hundreds, maybe thousands of people in the crowd, it turned out Simon of Cyrene was on his own carrying the cross. Which is how faith is, as we go through our own lives and near the moment of our own deaths. There may be many people who love us and support us at various points. At other points, there may be a precious few people in our lives who love and support us.

But for all of us, there are times when we have to carry the cross alone. Days that are heavy, lonely, painful, exhausting...whatever the cross may be for each one of us.

Times when we have only our faith to guide us and give us strength. The truth is none of us can make it through this life without carrying a cross or two along the way...

Who was Simon of Cyrene and why does he matter? Was he a man who quietly put his faith into action? Was he a pawn of the Roman army, compelled to participate in unjust violence and death? Was he a role model who demonstrated how we take up our own crosses?

Perhaps he was all of the above. Amen.

